The European Transatlantic Slave Trade

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — The Triangle Trade and the Middle Passage

Origins: How Plantation Economics Created a Human Catastrophe

The European transatlantic slave trade did not begin because Europeans were uniquely evil. It began because of economics — specifically, the economics of plantation agriculture in the Americas. When European powers — Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark — established colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas in the sixteenth century, they discovered that the land was extraordinarily fertile and that enormous profits could be made from growing sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other crops. But these crops required massive amounts of labour, applied in conditions so brutal that few people would submit to them voluntarily.

The Europeans first attempted to use indigenous American peoples as enslaved labour. This failed catastrophically: the indigenous populations had no immunity to European diseases, and millions died in the decades after contact. The colonisers then attempted to use poor Europeans — indentured servants who would work for a fixed period in exchange for passage to the Americas. This also proved insufficient and politically unstable: indentured servants who survived their contracts became free men and women with grievances.

The solution the colonisers chose was the enslavement of Africans. Africans were available through established trade networks. They had immunity to many of the tropical diseases that killed Europeans. They had experience with agriculture. And — crucially — they were sufficiently distant from Europe, geographically and culturally, that a system of total dehumanisation could be constructed around them without too many uncomfortable questions being asked at home. The transatlantic slave trade was not an ancient tradition. It was a business decision, made in boardrooms and royal courts, in service of profit.

> *"Capitalism was born drenched in the blood of enslaved Africans. Every pound of cotton, every teaspoon of sugar, every cup of coffee that built the wealth of Europe and America was produced by hands that were not free. Africa did not fall behind Europe. Africa was pushed — deliberately, violently, and profitably."*
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> **— Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa**

The Triangle Trade: A System of Extraction Across Three Continents

The transatlantic slave trade operated through a system of three-way commerce that historians call the Triangle Trade. Understanding this system is essential to understanding both the mechanics of the slave trade and the way it shaped the modern global economy.

Leg of the Triangle	What Was Transported
First Leg: Europe to Africa	European manufactured goods — textiles, firearms, alcohol, iron bars, and copper — were shipped from European ports to the West African coast and exchanged with African traders and rulers for enslaved people.
Second Leg: Africa to the Americas (Middle Passage)	Enslaved Africans, packed into the holds of slave ships in conditions of almost unimaginable horror, were transported across the Atlantic to Caribbean and American plantations. The crossing lasted six to twelve weeks.
Third Leg: The Americas to Europe	Raw materials produced by enslaved African labour — sugar, tobacco, cotton, indigo, rice — were shipped back to Europe, processed in factories, and sold at enormous profit that funded the next voyage.

The Triangle Trade made certain European cities fabulously wealthy. Bristol and Liverpool in England, Nantes and Bordeaux in France, Amsterdam in the Netherlands — these cities built their grand merchant houses, their civic institutions, and their cultural glory on the profits of the slave trade. Lloyd's of London, today the world's leading insurance market, began as an insurer of slave ships. Barclays Bank traces its origins to Quaker merchants who participated in the slave economy. The European Industrial

Revolution — the foundational moment of modern Western prosperity — was built in significant part on the capital accumulated through African enslavement.

The Middle Passage: Six Weeks in Hell

The second leg of the Triangle Trade — the ocean crossing from West Africa to the Americas — was known as the Middle Passage. It is among the most horrifying episodes in human history. The conditions aboard slave ships were so extreme, so deliberately dehumanising, that describing them strains the capacity of ordinary language.

Enslaved Africans were packed into the holds of ships with a calculated ruthlessness. Ship captains and their backers had worked out, through a grotesque form of actuarial accounting, the minimum space required to keep a sufficient number of captives alive to make a voyage profitable. The Brookes, a British slave ship whose interior layout was published in 1788 as part of the abolitionist campaign, was designed to carry 454 people but sometimes carried over 600. Each person was allocated a space roughly 180 centimetres long, 40 centimetres wide, and 80 centimetres high — less space than a coffin.

In these conditions, disease was rampant — dysentery, smallpox, scurvy, ophthalmia. The mortality rate on Middle Passage voyages averaged around fifteen percent over the course of the trade, meaning that roughly one in every seven people loaded onto a slave ship died before reaching the Americas. Many enslaved Africans resisted: historians have documented over four hundred slave ship revolts between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Others chose death over enslavement, throwing themselves overboard or refusing to eat. The crew's response to resistance was brutal — flogging, torture, and execution were used to maintain control.

> *"They gave me to understand that we should be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me."*
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> **— Olaudah Equiano, formerly enslaved Igbo man, 1789 autobiography**

Scale: The Numbers Behind the Crime

Between approximately 1501 and 1867, an estimated twelve to fifteen million Africans were transported across the Atlantic. The Slave Voyages database — the most comprehensive scholarly database of documented slave voyages — records over 36,000 individual slave ship voyages, carrying approximately 12.5 million captives, of whom approximately 10.7 million survived the Middle Passage. The difference — approximately 1.8 million people — died at sea.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Key Figures
Timeline: approximately 1501 to 1867 — nearly four centuries.
Documented voyages: over 36,000 slave ship voyages recorded in the Slave Voyages database.
Estimated total transported: 12 to 15 million Africans.
Deaths at sea (Middle Passage): approximately 1.8 million — about 15% of those loaded onto ships.
Additional deaths (raids, marches, coastal holding): estimated 1 to 2 million more.
Primary destinations: Brazil (approximately 45%), the Caribbean (approximately 40%), mainland North America and Spanish America (approximately 15%).
Peak of the trade: 18th century, when over 6 million Africans were transported.
Largest single national participant: Portugal / Brazil — responsible for approximately 40% of all transatlantic slave voyages.

African Kingdoms: Complicity, Victimhood, and Resistance

One of the most uncomfortable truths about the transatlantic slave trade is that some African rulers and merchants were active participants in it. The Kingdom of Dahomey, in present-day Benin, was perhaps the most significant African state that built its economy substantially around the capture and sale of enslaved people to European traders, raiding neighbouring peoples and selling captives at the port of Ouidah.

This fact is sometimes seized upon — particularly by those seeking to deflect responsibility from European powers — as proof that Africans were equally responsible

for the slave trade. This argument is historically illiterate. African slavery before the transatlantic trade was fundamentally different in character from the chattel slavery Europeans introduced: it was generally not hereditary, not racially defined, and not designed to achieve the total dehumanisation of the enslaved person. More importantly, the scale of African involvement in selling captives to Europeans was always dwarfed by the European demand that drove the entire system. Dahomey sold people to Europeans because Europeans created an enormously profitable market for them. Without that market, there would have been no Dahomean slave trade.

Many African kingdoms were overwhelmingly victims of the slave trade, not participants. The Kingdom of Kongo was devastated by Portuguese slave raiding despite its rulers' repeated protests and attempts at diplomacy. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria were raided so relentlessly that the Yoruba diaspora in the Americas is one of the largest African ethnic groups in the Caribbean and North America. And many Africans resisted: the Maroon communities of Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil — formed by escaped enslaved Africans who retreated into forests and mountains and fought for their freedom — represent one of the longest and most remarkable traditions of armed resistance in modern history.

Key Takeaways

The transatlantic slave trade was a deliberate business decision driven by the economics of plantation agriculture, operating through the Triangle Trade and inflicting the horror of the Middle Passage on an estimated 12 to 15 million Africans. It enriched European cities, banks, and industries while some African kingdoms — most notably Dahomey — became entangled in it as participants, even as many others, like Kongo and the Yoruba states, were overwhelmingly its victims. The next lesson examines the consequences of both slave trade systems in depth, through specific case studies of African societies transformed by them.